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ABSTRACT

By focusing on the corps of cadets of the United States Military Academy, this study dissects the major strands of white middle class prejudice in the years between 1802 when the institution was founded, and the outbreak of the Civil War. Due to the makeup of cadet population, the prejudices found among the members of that corps can serve as valid indicators of contemporary bourgeois attitudes in the United States. At the beginning of the period Jews, Indians, and Latin Americans enjoyed greater acceptance than they did from the mid-1820's onward. While tolerance for alien cultures was decreasing, sectional virulence grew, evolving from harmless teasing in the early 19th century to open violence by the late 1850's. Still, even with the increase in regional hostility, intersectional friendships continued to exist. West Point attitudes toward religion throughout the antebellum era showed continued preference for the Protestant denominations, especially Episcopalian, while Catholicism gained somewhat grudging acceptance by the predominantly Protestant society. (Author/DE)

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REFLECTIONS OF AMERICAN PREJUDICE AT ANTEBELLUM WEST POINT (1802-1861)

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It is a truism which hardly needs verification here that prejudice, the most universal and probably the most ancient of human sentiments, has appeared in every era of American History from the Age of Exploration to the present day. Less self-evident, perhaps, is the fact that neither the force nor the direction of American racial, ethnic, religious and geographic bigotry has remained constant; not only has the composition of the target groups changed periodically, the severity of the discrimination against those groups has also varied. To put it another way, prejudice in the United States has constantly evolved -- the categories of people who suffered the disabilities of bias in Washington's time were not necessarily the same as those who felt the lash in the "Age of Jackson." Similarly, the degree of tolerance accorded minorities has also oscillated rather than moved in a straight linear progression.

By focusing on the corps of cadets at the United States Military Academy this study attempts to dissect the major strands of white middle class prejudice in the years between 1802, when the institution was founded, and the outbreak of the Civil War, to trace the course of these strands in the same period, and finally to account for the evolution of the biases which are uncovered. For such an endeavor the body of West Point cadets makes an ideal vehicle. To begin with the corps was made up of young men from every congressional district and territory; moreover, the Academy was open to any white male between sixteen and twenty-one years of age who could obtain an appointment and meet the relatively easy entrance requirements.[1] Officially,

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[1]James L. Morrison, Jr., "The United States Military Academy, 1833-1866: Years of Progress and Turmoil," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1970), p. 96.

neither financial, social, nor religious background played a role in gaining admission to West Point, but this is not to say that all sects and classes were equally represented in the corps of cadets. Although not a few poor youngsters and an occasional wealthy one did win appointments, the vast majority, some 86 percent, came from what today would be classified as the middle class. Furthermore, only 23 percent of all the students who entered the Academy during the span of years under investigation came from cities; most hailed from small towns and farms.[2] Thus, in its geographic array, income distribution, and demographic orientation the corps of cadets constituted a singularly representative microcosm of the larger society from which it was drawn. Indeed, it is not too much to claim that the student body at West Point was a true child of the American white middle class. This being the case, the prejudices found among the members of that corps can serve as valid indicators of contemporary bourgeois attitudes in the United States, a contention which the historical record fully substantiates.

Simon Levy, the second man to graduate from West Point, was a Jew. His accomplishment, however, did not signal the dawn of general religious toleration at the infant institution, for in the subsequent sixty years only three more members of that faith entered the Academy. Moreover, Levy and his co-religionists suffered official discrimination while cadets; they were required to attend Protestant services at the chapel each Sunday and were not given the opportunity to worship according to their own rites, a practice which continued,

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[2] Ibid., p. 94. Data are derived from "Circumstances of Parents of Cadets," U.S. Military Academy Archives.

incidentally, until World War II, long past the period under current investigation.[3] Catholics had attended West Point since its earliest days, too, but unlike the Jews, their numbers increased over the years; in addition, they enjoyed privileges which were not extended to the latter. For instance, Catholics could obtain exemption from attendance at Protestant services and openly practice their own faith. In fact, after extended discussion by the authorities the superintendent in the early 1850's authorized a small room in one of the public buildings for use as a chapel by Catholic cadets and other members of the garrison -- mostly Irish servant girls and enlisted men -- whenever circuit-riding priests visited the post. The facilities afforded Catholics for worship were not as comfortable or elaborate as those assigned to Protestants; nor was a priest ever given official status, whereas there was always in residence a Protestant chaplain whose salary was paid by the government.[4] From this it can be seen that a definite religious hierarchy was much in evidence at the Academy. Catholics ranked lower than Protestants but higher than Jews.

With the exception of Catholics all students, professors and army officers at West Point were required by regulation to attend the weekly Protestant services at the cadet chapel, the United States Constitution notwithstanding. Ostensibly, these services were non-denominational, but actually the Episcopal

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[3] Register of Graduates and Former Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1802-1963, (West Point Alumni Association, 1963) pp. 201, 209, 250. Bernard Postal and Lionel Koppman, A Jewish Tourist's Guide to the U.S., (Philadelphia; 1954), pp. 366-388. Maurice J. Bloom, "Jews at West Point," Liberal Judaism, XI, (September and October 1943). Conversation with Lt. Col. Milton A Laitman, USA (Ret'd), Class of 1939, U.S.M.A.

[4] Morrison, op cit., pp. 80, 136. Douglas S. Freeman, R.E. Lee (4 Vol., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), I, p. 339.

order of worship prevailed. As a matter of fact, only two of the eight chaplains assigned to the military academy between 1802 and 1861 were not Episcopalians. Interestingly, during the tenure of these two dissenters Episcopal communicants, including cadets, were granted dispensation to attend services in the nearby village of Buttermilk Falls. At times cadets of other persuasions complained of the strong Episcopal coloration but without effect. Dissenting Protestants, Jews, atheists and agnostics had to attend the cadet chapel regardless of their beliefs or desires. Nor did the matter end there. The Episcopal influence extended beyond the confines of the pulpit since the chaplain also doubled as Professor of Ethics on the faculty and in that capacity taught all First Classmen (Seniors) in the section room.[5] Consequently, both the religious and the ethical concepts to which the cadets were exposed stemmed almost exclusively from the Episcopal version of Protestant Christianity.

The air of constancy which pervaded religion and ethics at pre-Civil War West Point did not hold true with regard to ethnic and racial policies. Blacks, to be sure, were uniformly excluded throughout the period; however, the treatment of other minorities was less consistent. By way of example, in 1822 David Moniac, a full-blooded Alabama Creek, graduated. Although he resigned from the army after leaving the Academy, Moniac returned to active duty as a Major of Creek Volunteers when the Florida Indian Wars began and, ironically, was killed in action fighting against his own people.[6] Considering the military and sociological possibilities such an approach offered, it is

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[5] Ibid. Russell F. Weigley, Quartermaster General of the Union Army, a Biography of M.C. Meigs, (Columbia, 1959), p. 29. Lloyd Lewis, Captain Sam Grant, (Little, Brown, 1959), p. 71. Morrison, op cit., p. 80.

[6] Register of Graduates..., op cit., p. 209.

strange that this successful experiment in Indian education was not repeated in the ante-bellum era. David Moniac stands as the lone monument to what might have been. It was also in the early 19th century that Latin American cadets were admitted for the first time. Two Argentinians, Lewis and Mathew Blanco, entered with the Class of 1820, and in 1824 another South American, Julian Paez of Columbia, matriculated; unfortunately, all three came to grief academically and failed to graduate.[7] Thereafter, no more foreign students were admitted until after the Civil War. The existing evidence does not explain why the admission of Latin Americans and Indians was so abruptly terminated in the mid-1820's, but whatever else may have fomented this change shifting American attitudes undoubtedly played a major part.

The pattern of attendance for naturalized immigrants and their children differed drastically from that which applied to Indians and Latins. The earliest of the foreign-born Americans to graduate was John D. Wyndham of the Class of 1806. A native of England and a former officer in the British forces, Wyndham served in the United States Army until 1812 when he was dismissed for disloyalty. Other former Britishers who graduated with early classes were John Monroe, a Scot, and Thomas J. Baird who had emigrated from Ireland. Baird quit the army in 1828, but Monroe remained on active duty until his death in 1861.[8] In the first half of the 19th century the sons of naturalized Americans from Great Britain, and Germany, entered the Academy in constantly increasing numbers. Of this group only the Catholic Irish appear to have

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[7] Ibid., pp. 208, 213.
[8] Ibid., pp. 202, 204.

suffered social discrimination, and the extent to which this was generic as opposed to personal is still open to question. One such Irishman, Philip Sheridan, keenly felt the snubs he encountered, but Sheridan was a notorious hothead, contemptuous of authority and always spoiling for a fight. In contrast, Patrick O'Rorke, a compatriot of the same general vintage as Sheridan, enjoyed the esteem of his classmates and so impressed his teachers that he stood first in his class and held high military office in the corps of cadets.[9] In the light of O'Rorke's outstanding record Sheridan's difficulties would seem to have resulted more from his personality than his ethnic origins.

That sons of poor families, such as Sheridan and O'Rorke, not to mention many others, could succeed at the military academy is indicative of the absence of economic discrimination there. From its earliest days the Academy had attracted students from the less affluent segments of society. Not only was tuition free, each cadet received a salary while attending West Point, and though the sum was not munificent, it was sufficient to defray expenses. In addition, the entrance requirements were deliberately kept low in order to avoid penalizing youngsters who could not afford first-rate preparatory schooling.[10] Needless to say, many boys took advantage of this opportunity to obtain a free education in exchange for a term of military service. Of the more than 2,000 cadets who enrolled during the period under examination 11.6 percent came from families classified as "Indigent" or "In Reduced Circumstances" while only 4.2 percent came from "Affluent" backgrounds. From time to time in the Jacksonian Era and later the military academy was attacked as a bastion of aristocracy and

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[9] Ibid., pp. 241, 250. Morrison, op cit., p. 131

[10] U.S. Military Academy Regulations, 1832, p 7. Morrison, op cit., pp. 96, 97.

economic privilege. These charges are demonstrably false. The student body was largely middle class in its economic complexion; furthermore, such skewing from the norm as there was tended toward the lower end of the wealth scale, not the upper.[10] With respect to its financial background the corps of cadets was far more typical of American society than its detractors would admit.

The regional leavening of the corps reflected the national polity even more faithfully than its economic composition. By law each congressional district and territory was allocated one cadet in residence, no more and no less.[11] Hence the geographic texture of the student body almost precisely matched the population distribution of the American people. Because of this feature the course that sectional prejudice ran at the military academy was a replica in miniature of what transpired in the nation at the time. Regional bias can be traced to the founding of West Point. In the early days, however, such prejudice was mild in form, usually consisting of good natured kidding about different dietary habits and speech patterns, together with occasionally more acidulous jibes that slavery made Southern cadets lazy and that Yankees were shown undue favoritism in the classroom. Up until the 1850's conflicts resulting from sectionalism were rare; more often than not cadets from different regions roomed together and became close, lifelong friends. But as tensions mounted elsewhere, what had been friendly rivalry and banter among the cadets began to take on a more ominous cast. In 1857, as an illustration, the president of the student debating society, an organization which had previously been open to all comers

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[10] See Footnote 2 above.

[11] Morrison, op cit., p. 96. Leonard D. White, The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801-1829, (MacMillan, 1951), p. 256.

without regard to region, found it necessary to petition the superintendent for permission to reorganize the club with membership to be based on geographic quotas; otherwise, the president feared, sectional animosities would destroy the debating society. In the same period other evidence of polarization became noticeable. The companies in the cadet battalion became "Northern" or "Southern" in coloration, a development which earlier generations of students would have considered bizarre. This change, it might be added, took place without the official cognizance of the authorities. According to regulations, cadets were assigned to companies solely on the basis of height, the tall men going to "A" and "D" Companies and the short ones to "B" and "C." Obviously, any deviation from this rule would have been instantaneously apparent at the first formation, but somehow within the constraints imposed by height the cadets on their own initiative added a geographic factor so that the North and the South were each represented by one tall and one short company. A little later with the advent of bloodshed in Kansas, the Sumner-Brooks affair, and the John Brown episode sectional tempers at West Point rose to fever pitch, and bloody clashes became common. One of the most celebrated of these involved Wade Hampton Gibbes of South Carolina and Emory Upton of New York. In the course of a barracks discussion concerning the trial of John Brown Gibbes accused Upton, whose abolitionist views had already earned him considerable notoriety, of having enjoyed the favors of black girls while he had been a student at Oberlin. Thereupon, Upton issued a challenge which the South Carolinian gleefully accepted, and a serious altercation followed. From this point on sectional arguments invariably provoked scuffles and at times more widespread disturbances. Yet in spite of the progressive growth of tension and violence, the ties of intersectional friendship remained strong right up to 1861. When cadets from the

seceding states departed for home, their Northern comrades evinced genuine sorrow at seeing them go, and for their part the Southerners almost to a man bitterly regretted the choice regional loyalty forced them to make. Boys from the border states, whether they decided to remain with or leave the Union, seemed to have suffered the most acute agony, but in no case, regardless of his state of origin or eventual decision, did a single student welcome the break and the coming of the war.[12] And in this respect the corps of cadets probably reflected American public opinion with a fair degree of accuracy. Running high, sectional feelings could easily lead to harsh words and even harsher acts, but this was not the same as desiring the dissolution of the Union or a civil war.

If the thesis that the corps of cadets functioned as an accurate reflector of the prevalent biases in the larger society, it would seem that those biases followed a clearly discernible, albeit irregular, path in the years between 1802 and 1861. At the beginning of the period Jews, Indians, and Latin Americans enjoyed greater acceptance than they did from the mid-1820's onward. While tolerance for alien cultures was decreasing, sectional virulence grew, evolving from harmless teasing in the early 19th century to open violence by the late 50's. Still, this gargantuan increase in regional hostility should not be permitted to obscure the fact that intersectional friendships and Southern loyalty to the Union continued to exist. Turning to religious prejudice, an examination of West Point attitudes shows that throughout the antebellum era the Protestant faith continued to exercise its ancient dominance over the American bourgeoisie and that of the various Protestant denominations the

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[12] James L. Morrison, Jr., "The Struggle between Sectionalism and Nationalism at Antebellum West Point, 1830-1861," Civil War History, Vol. 19, No. 2, (June,1973), pp. 138 et passim.

the Episcopal ranked primus inter pares, socially if not officially. Nonetheless, the religious situation did not remain static; during the same period Catholicism gained growing if somewhat grudging acceptance by the predominantly Protestant society.

In seeking explanations for the directions these diverse forms of prejudice took between 1802 and 1861 it is necessary to shift focus from the West Point microcosm to the larger stream of American culture. Up until the 1820's, as Parrington, Van Deusen and others have pointed out, the tolerance born of the Enlightenment and nurtured by the political and intellectual leadership of the new United States continued to hold sway. With the advent of "Jacksonian Democracy" and white American expansionism, however, the older humanitarian spirit died. The rise of the "Common Man" and the near-concurrent beginning of the conquest of the continent created a more provincial and intolerant approach toward other cultures.[13] The Indian and the Latin American, since they not only represented different civilizations but also stood in the way of Manifest Destiny, made particularly attractive targets for this new, more vitriolic sentiment. Surely it is no mere coincidence in this regard that the failure of Clay's efforts to build better relations with Latin America and the implementation of Jackson's Indian Removal policy corresponded chronologically with the disappearance of members of those groups from West Point. As for the Jew, his exotic ethnic and religious habits, together with his proclivity for dwelling

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[13]Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, An Interpretation of American Literature From the Beginnings to 1920, (3 Vol., Harcourt Brace, 1927), III, p. xxiii. Glyndon Van Deusen, The Jacksonian Era, 1828-1848 (Harper, 1966), pp. 16-17. Edward Pessen, Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics, (Dorsey, 1969) pp. 297-300. Charles M. Wiltse, The New Nation, 1800-1845, (Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 152.

in cities and pursuing commerce, made him a natural butt of the increased nativism which accompanied the spread of political democracy in an essentially agrarian society. Considering the course of events and the temper of the times, the exclusion of Indians and South Americans and the discrimination against Jews which characterized post-1820 West Point were almost inevitable. By the same token the prejudices of the white American majority undoubtedly provoked a kindred response among its victims. Given the existing attitudes, Jews, Latin Americans, and Indians, deeply offended and possibly frightened by what they saw happening in the United States, may well have lost interest in attending the institution which exemplified the military power of that nation even if they could gain admission. In any case, whether these people were deliberately discouraged from attending, whether they refrained of their own volition, or, as is more likely, whether their absence came from a combination of the two, the result was the same -- a net loss for the entire country.

Manifestly, the experience of foreign-born and first generation Americans was different. Even though they, too, found themselves relegated to social inferiority by the Protestant majority, the members of this group had a weapon at their disposal which the Latin, Indian, and Jew did not -- sheer weight of numbers, particularly in urban areas where Catholic immigrants tended to congregate.[14] This in turn enabled them to muster the political strength requisite for obtaining appointments to the military academy and for forcing recognition of their rights at that institution once they had grown large enough to constitute a significant minority of the garrison and the corps of cadets.

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[14]Pessen, loc. cit. Wiltse, loc. cit.

The continued suzerainty of Protestantism at West Point, as in the remainder of American society, is hardly astonishing; however, the prestigious position of Episcopalianism at the Academy is at first glance less easily explicable since that sect did not comprise a major force insofar as numbers of communicants was concerned. The existing evidence does not provide a precise answer to this conundrum, but certain factors do point to the underlying reason. Episcopalianism, as several historians have maintained, was the preferred religion of the early 19th century ruling elite, particularly in the Middle Atlantic states and the seaboard South, which produced most of the political and military leadership in the years before the Civil War.[15] Furthermore, a commission in the armed forces was a stepping stone which those of humble birth could use to reach social preferment, as the careers of Burnside, Grant, Stonewall Jackson, and a host of other officers attest. All this being true, it would be natural for the authorities at West Point, knowing the prestige of Episcopalianism and anxious to avoid offending the high-ranking communicants of that sect, to foster it among the cadets. Further, a perceptive, ambitious youngster would not be blind to the advantages of affiliation with the denomination of the elite. One thinks in this regard of new Lieutenant James E. B. Stuart who, after wrestling with the question of the proper church to join, rejected Methodism and became an Episcopalian.[16] Certainly, a man aspiring for greater social acceptability would be tempted to espouse the faith which enjoyed the

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[15] Weigley, Quartermaster General..., op. cit., p. 29. Clement Eaton, A History of the Old South, (2nd ed., MacMillan, 1966), p. 434. Allan Nevins, Ordeal of the Union: Fruits of Manifest Destiny, 1847-1852, (8 Vol., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), I, p. 61.

[16] John W. Thomason, Jr., Jeb Stuart, (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp. 10, 47. Burke Davis, Jeb Stuart, The Last Cavalier, (Rinehart, 1957), p. 43.

greatest prestige among his countrymen.

With respect to sectionalism, the most dangerous manifestation of American prejudice at the time, it seems worth reiterating that the course of regional bias at the military academy matched that which afflicted the nation as a whole. In this connection the fact that at West Point intersectional friendships and loyalties helped mitigate divisiveness should be of particular interest to the historian. Assuming that such feelings were not peculiar to the cadets but were to some extent typical of the larger society as well, it would appear that the Civil War revisionists, such as Craven and Randall, have a much stronger case for their interpretation of the causation than their critics. Secession and the war which it precipitated came about largely because of agitators who exacerbated tensions, not some fundamental moral split over the issue of slavery or its extension into the territories. Certainly, this interpretation is supported by what happened at the Academy, as has been demonstrated, and by the course of events elsewhere as well. For instance, the machinations and downright chicanery employed by the "Fire-eaters" in their efforts to force secession could only have been generated by the apprehension that they could not get their way by open, democratic means, a fear which was based on solid fact if contemporary West Point attitudes were a true indication. In a slightly different vein the belief held by Lincoln and the conservative Republicans that in the final analysis Southern loyalty to the Union would prove decisive was not without foundation.[17] Admittedly, those who clung to this hope overestimated the shrewdness of the ardent secessionist, but this is not to say that such expectations

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[17] David Donald and J. G. Randall, The Civil War and Reconstruction, (2nd ed., D.C. Heath, 1961), pp. 127-141. David M. Potter, Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis, (Yale, 1967), pp. 59, 76, 112 et passim.

were foolish. The agonies suffered by Southern cadets in early 1861 stand as proof positive that Lincoln's faith was not altogether vain.

In closing it should be noted that although this essay ends with the coming of the Civil War, the value of the military academy to the cultural historian does not end at that point. Unlike other nations the United States has never drawn its officer corps from a blooded aristocracy or privileged order. Today, as in antebellum America, the ranks of the corps of cadets at West Point continue to be filled with an economic and geographic cross section of the American people. Therefore, the institution can serve as a handy device for measuring popular prejudices and attitudes in other periods of history. Scholars ignorant of this fact have all too often made the false, if perhaps comforting, assumption that the Academy is a thing apart, the cradle of a military caste divorced from the rest of American society. Such an assumption may be valid in the narrow, professional sense but not when it comes to cultural viewpoints or values. When Phil Sheridan claimed, "The only good Indians I ever saw were dead ones"; when latter-day West Pointer, W.C. Westmoreland, observed that "Asiatics" did not fear death or suffer the pangs of grief as Americans did; and when as late as the mid-1930's white cadets universally ostracized the few blacks who had the temerity to join the corps, neither the generals nor the cadets were speaking for an atypical military clique but for the great mass of their countrymen.

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